

DISCUSSION PAPER

DOES GROUP FARMING EMPOWER RURAL WOMEN?

The Indian experience



No. 20, December 2017

BINA AGARWAL

PROGRESS OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN 2018

The UN Women discussion paper series is a new initiative led by the Research and Data section. The series features research commissioned as background papers for publications by leading researchers from different national and regional contexts. Each paper benefits from an anonymous external peer review process before being published in this series.

This paper has been produced for the UN Women flagship report Progress of the World's Women 2018 by Bina Agarwal, Professor of Development Economics and Environment, University of Manchester, UK, and former Director and Professor of Economics, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADS	Area Development Society
APMSS	Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society
CDS	Community Development Society
CEC	Centre for Environmental Concerns
GCA	gross cropped area (total area under all crops cultivated in the year)
Gol	Government of India
ha	hectare
JLG	Joint Liability Group
JWIF	JLG women's individual family farm, Kerala
K. Mission	Kudumbashree Mission
K. Network	Kudumbashree Network
MNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
NHG	neighborhood group
NGF	non-group farm
NGO	non-governmental organization
NSS	National Sample Survey
OBC	Other Backward Caste
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDG	Samatha Dharani Group
SERP	Society for the Elimination of Rural Poverty
SHG	Self-Help Group
SWIF	SDG women's individual family farm, Telangana
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institutions
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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SUMMARY

Few programmes for economically empowering rural women in India have focused seriously on farming — the one occupation in which the women have most experience. Hence, two state-level initiatives in the early 2000s — one undertaken in Telangana and the other in Kerala — stand out, both because they focused on improving women's livelihoods within agriculture itself, and because of the innovative institutional form by which they sought to do so, namely group farming. The initiatives encouraged rural women to lease in land collectively, pool their labour and capital, and cultivate jointly on a voluntary basis. Hence they recognized women as farmers outside the domain of family farms under which most cultivation is done globally, and in which women are typically unpaid family workers with little autonomy.

This paper, based on the author's detailed primary surveys in the two states (covering three districts of Telangana and two districts of Kerala), examines whether group farming can enable women farmers to overcome resource constraints and gain economically compared to individual farmers. Can it also empower them socially and politically? Moreover, since the approach to group farming differs notably in the two states, the paper examines which approach is more effective, and why. To date, despite its importance and scale, there has been no systematic study of group farming, based on carefully collected quantitative and qualitative data, in either state.

This study finds that in terms of farm productivity, group farms relative to individual farms in the same state perform significantly better in Kerala but less well in Telangana. Among the constraints that Telangana's groups face are: a lack of state support (technical and financial); difficulties in accessing good quality land; the emphasis placed by the non-governmental organization (NGO) that catalysed the groups that they cultivate foodgrains for food security, rather than more viable cash crops; large group size; and groups being constituted almost entirely

of Scheduled Caste (SC) women which limits their economic and social reach. In contrast, Kerala's group farms enjoy a number of advantages: support from the local government and the Kudubashree network on a continuing basis; freedom to choose their cropping patterns, including growing commercially profitable crops; bank linkages for credit; small group size; and socio-economic heterogeneity in group composition, which broadens the women's social capital and can prove especially useful for accessing land. Nevertheless, it is notable that in both states women's group farms do much better when not cultivating a traditional food crop such as rice, for which access to suitable paddy land and long experience particularly matter.

Also, group farms in both Telangana and Kerala do well in terms of annual net returns per farm, calculated by subtracting all paid out costs from annual value of output. In Telangana, group farms are broadly on par with individual farms for all districts taken together, while in Kerala net returns for group farms (again for both districts taken together) are substantially higher than for individual farms, making an important addition to women's incomes.

Beyond productivity and profits, group members in both states report enhanced capabilities in terms of gaining familiarity with economic institutions and improved knowledge of new cultivation practices — knowledge that they also use for their family farms. Moreover, group members in both states emphasize that they feel socially empowered in terms of the respect they now earn from spouses and the village community. In addition they feel politically empowered: many of them have stood for panchayat (village council) elections, and a fair proportion has won.

The lessons learnt from these experiences can help not only in strengthening group farming further, but also in assessing how these models could be replicated in other regions.

RÉSUMÉ

Peu de programmes économiques visant à autonomiser les femmes rurales en Inde ont mis sérieusement l'accent sur le secteur agricole, qui est pourtant celui où les femmes sont les plus expérimentées. En conséquence, deux initiatives publiques lancées au début des années 2000 – l'une à Telangana et l'autre à Kerala – se démarquent des autres, parce qu'elles s'emploient à améliorer les moyens de subsistance des femmes dans le secteur agricole et en raison de l'originalité de leur structure. Il s'agit des groupements agricoles. Ces initiatives encouragent les femmes rurales à louer des terres collectivement, à mettre en commun leurs main d'œuvre et leur capital, et à cultiver des terres sur une base volontaire. Ces initiatives postulent que, contrairement aux pratiques habituelles dans le monde selon lesquelles les femmes travaillent sans être rémunérées et disposent d'une faible autonomie, les femmes peuvent travailler comme agricultrices hors des exploitations familiales.

Ce document, qui se fonde sur les études initiales détaillées de l'auteur dans les deux États (qui couvrent trois districts de Telangana et deux districts de Kerala), examine si les groupements agricoles peuvent permettre aux agricultrices de palier des ressources insuffisantes et de faire des bénéfices. Les groupements agricoles peuvent-ils également leur permettre de s'autonomiser socialement et politiquement ? En outre, étant donné que l'approche des groupements agricoles diffère grandement d'un État à l'autre, ce document examine quelle est l'approche la plus effi-

les obstacles auxquels font face les groupements agricoles de Telangana, on compte l'absence d'appui étatique (technique et financier) ; les difficultés rencontrées pour avoir accès à des terres de bonne qualité ; l'accent placé par les organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) qui ont promu les groupements pour qu'ils cultivent des céréales aux fins de la sécurité alimentaire, plutôt que des cultures commerciales plus viables ; la taille des groupements importants ; et le fait que les groupements agricoles soient constitués presque entièrement de femmes de la « caste répertoriée » (« Scheduled Caste ») ce qui limite leur portée économique et sociale. En revanche, le groupement de Kerala dispose d'un certain nombre d'avantages : l'appui continu du gouvernement local et du réseau Kudubashree ; la liberté de choisir ses modes de culture, en cultivant notamment des cultures rentables sur le plan commercial ; des liens avec les banques pour obtenir des crédits ; la petite taille des groupements ; une certaine hétérogénéité dans la composition socio-économique, ce qui élargit le capital social des femmes et peut s'avérer utile pour avoir accès à des terres. On note néanmoins que dans les deux États, les groupements agricoles de femmes obtiennent de meilleurs rendements lorsqu'elles ne cultivent pas des cultures vivrières traditionnelles telles que le riz, une culture qui nécessite l'accès à des rizières et une longue expérience (que les agriculteurs possèdent).

Par ailleurs, tant à Telangana qu'à Kerala, les groupements agricoles obtiennent de bons résultats en

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